

Can You Say Sibling Rivalry?

SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

August 9 & 10, 2008

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Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 (NRSV)

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

¹²Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." ¹⁴So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, ¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²²Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. ²³So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

²⁵Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers agreed. ²⁸When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Rivalries can be poisonous in any family. But in Jacob's family, the brothers' envy of Joseph leads to death, or at least the closest thing to it. What good could possibly come from yet another tragic betrayal in Jacob's family?

How could things have gotten so bad between Joseph and his brothers? Is it really all about a dream and a father's favoritism? The story of Abraham's family helps us understand that there is much more to this. So let's try to imagine some of the family dynamics among the twelve brothers, as we look back over the stories of the last few weeks.

The brothers' grandmother, Rebekah, conspired with their father, Jacob, to steal the birthright and blessing that their grandfather, Isaac, intended for Jacob's older twin brother, Esau.¹ When Esau threatened to kill his brother for the theft, Jacob fled to Haran, the family's ancestral home.

When Jacob got to Haran and met his uncle, Laban, the tables were turned. This time, Jacob was the deceived rather than the deceiver. Though Jacob loved Laban's daughter, Rachel, he was tricked into first marrying her older sister, Leah, whom he did not love and never would. Jacob pressed on in his quest to marry Rachel and ended up marrying *both* sisters, sacrificing fourteen years of his life to gain the beautiful Rachel as his bride. Not surprisingly, the two sisters soon found themselves enmeshed in a bitter rivalry over who would give Jacob sons, for there must yet be a family built on God's promises to Abraham.

¹It all seems more confusing than it really is. If you are not familiar with these stories, you might look back over the Sermon Background Studies of recent weeks. All the studies are archived as pdf files at www.thebibleacademy.com. More than 300 are posted there.

Because Leah was unloved, God blessed her with a child and then another . . . and another . . . and another. Four sons in all -- while Rachel remained childless. Envious of her sister, Rachel sent in her maid to get pregnant by Jacob. Bilhah had two sons which Rachel could legally claim as her own. Leah, fearing that she would fall behind in the baby race, sent in her own maid, Zilpah, who had two more sons. Leah herself then gave birth to two more sons and a daughter named Dinah. After all this, God finally blessed Rachel with a child of her own, whom she named Joseph.

Twelve brothers . . . Twelve tribes?

In all, Jacob had twelve sons:

Leah – Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun

Rachel – Joseph and Benjamin

Zilpah (Leah's maid) – Gad and Asher

Bilhah (Rachel's maid) – Dan and Naphtali

Though Jacob's sons would be the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel, the biblical lists vary a bit.

When the Israelites' settle in Canaan, the land is divided among the tribes. However, following the Law of Moses, the tribe of Levi (one of Leah's sons) was to be the priestly tribe and was to get no land.

Thus, you'd think that there would then be eleven tribes with land. However, perhaps to maintain the "twelve," the land that would go to Joseph's tribe actually went to his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. This is how the lists of tribes in the book of Numbers are built.

In the end, two tribes settle in the south of Canaan (Judah and Benjamin) and the other ten settle in the north. After the death of King Solomon, the ten northern tribes separate from the southern tribes and form the Kingdom of Israel. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin then become the Kingdom of Judah.

In 722BC, the ten northern tribes are overrun by the Assyrians and disappear from the pages of history.

The ideal of twelve would stay with the Israelites even into the New Testament, for Jesus gathered around himself an inner circle of twelve disciples.

Remembering Jacob's sacrifice of fourteen years to be married to Rachel, it isn't hard to imagine how he must have felt when Rachel was finally able to give birth herself. It is as if Joseph was the fruit of their long and troubled love. And when Rachel later dies during the birth of her second son, Benjamin . . . well, who can really blame Joseph for picking favorites.

But what stories were told about all this. Told to and among the brothers. What were things really like between Isaac and Rebekah after her betrayal, or between Rebekah and her son, Esau? What were the grandchildren told about their mothers' rivalries and their father's love for only one? Who told them the stories?

It is pretty easy to imagine the family dynamics that swirled around those children as they grew up. The accusations that were made. The resentments that were harbored. None of the boys was Joseph's full brother. Only he was the product of Jacob and Rachel's love. Surely, Leah's sons knew that their father didn't love their mother. The cycle of deceit and envy that began with Esau and Jacob now reaches full flower.

Deception piled on deception

The stories of Jacob and his family are of one deception piled on another. The brothers conspire to kill Joseph and toss him into a dry cistern. They will simply lie and say that animals got him. One of them, Reuben, talks them all into not killing Joseph but simply leaving him in the hole . . . as if that is really better!

Then Judah has either a pang of conscience or sniffs the scent of opportunity. Some Ishmaelite traders have wandered by and Judah urges the brothers to spare Joseph and sell him into slavery. See, Joseph can live *and* the brothers can reap a windfall. A clever head and a cold heart.

Of course, the brothers must come up with a cover story. So Jacob the deceiver is deceived yet again. The brothers tell their father that Joseph has been killed and they even produce the boy's beautiful coat, now covered in goat's blood. Jacob would never be the same and would cling even more tightly to young Benjamin, the last remaining child of his beloved Rachel. Meanwhile, Joseph makes his way to slavery in Egypt.

Randy Pautsch, of "The Last Lecture" fame, recently succumbed to his long battle with pancreatic cancer. He said that if he could give his kids only three words of advice they would be, "tell the truth" and if he got three more, it would be "all the time." So much pain and heartache are born out of the deceptions in these stories. And yet, God's purposes move forward. Abraham will have his large family, descendants that outnumber the stars. Despite our secrets and lies, God works through us all. We worship an amazing God who loves us more and puts up with more from us than we really know.

Dreams in the Bible

Dreams are central to Joseph's story. The following is a good introduction to the topic of dreams in the Bible and is abridged from the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*.

Ancient Understanding

From the earliest times people viewed dreams as a mystery, provoking speculation about another actual sphere of existence in which the person lived and acted while the body slept. Dreams, especially those of emperors and kings, were held to be messages from the gods.

Ancient recorded dreams focused on three main areas: religion, politics, and personal destiny. Religious dreams called for piety and devotion to the gods. Political dreams supposedly forecast the outcome of battles and the future destiny of nations. Personal dreams guided family decisions and presaged serious crises.

Sometimes the god took the initiative and forewarned the person about something unexpected. Sometimes the ruler or general would go to a pagan temple or holy place and sleep there, hoping to bring on a dream that would help him cope with some serious problem. In some dreams the message was clear; more often it had to be discovered by individuals who specialized in dream interpretation. Records were kept concerning specific dreams and the subsequent events.

Old Testament Use

Dreams played an important part in the lives of God's people. Of the nearly 120 references to dreams in the OT, 52 come in Genesis during the early patriarchal period and 29 in the book of Daniel. In reality, however, only 14 specific dreams are recorded in the OT. Most of them are in Genesis and reflect God's direct revelation to the patriarchs. Even Daniel tells about only two of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams—the large, manlike image and the gigantic tree chopped down—and his own dream about the four beasts and the Ancient of Days.

The OT understanding of dreams had several significant features. Like the rest of the ancient world, people of God believed that God communicated in dreams. Yet there is in the OT accounts a reserve that is lacking in the perverse and obscene scenes often described in pagan dream records. Another distinction is that God is the initiator; he gives the revelatory dreams when, where, and to whom he pleases—a truth painfully learned by Saul (1 Sam 28:6, 15). More significantly, the secular approach to interpretation was specifically rejected. Understanding of dream symbols came not by research in dream books or by natural human ability. When Joseph interpreted the dreams of his two Egyptian fellow prisoners and later of the pharaoh himself, he insisted on giving full credit to God (Gen 40:8; 41:7, 25, 28, 39). Similarly, Daniel informed Nebuchadnezzar that the God in heaven who reveals secrets would make known the king's dream and its meaning, in which task professional dream interpreters had failed (Dan 2:27–28).

Unlike their neighbors, the OT saints knew that a dream was a "vision of the night" (Job 33:15), and figuratively represented the spiritual realm (Job 20:8; Psalms 73:20; 126:1; Is 29:7–8).

God used dreams in OT days to protect his servants (Gen 20), to reveal himself to people in a special way (28:12), to provide guidance in specific circumstances (31:10–13), and to forewarn about personal future events (37:5–20). Dreams were also used to predict the history of nations (chapters 40–41) and to foretell the four great successive world empires that would be replaced by God's eternal kingdom (Dan 4:19–27).

New Testament Use

The few specific dreams in the NT all come from Matthew, five of these in the first two chapters. They emphasize the divine care and protection of the baby Jesus. First, there was God's provision that Jesus would grow up in a home with a father and mother and thus avoid the cruelty and shame of being unjustly called an illegitimate child (Mt 1:19–23). Then the wise men were instructed in a dream not to tell Herod where Jesus was living (2:12). Jesus was further protected from jealous King Herod by the dream that told Joseph to flee to Egypt with Mary and the child (v 13). On Herod's death, Joseph was divinely advised in a dream to return home from Egypt (v 20). Finally, God warned Joseph to avoid Judea, where Herod's evil son Archelaus reigned, and to settle in Galilee instead (v 22).

The only other specific dream mentioned in the NT prompted Pilate's wife to warn her husband, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man" (Mt 27:19, NIV).

READING WITH HEART & MIND

These chapters complete Joseph's story and set the stage for the book of Exodus.

Monday, Genesis 45 Joseph reveals himself to his brothers

Tuesday, Genesis 46:1 – 47:12 Joseph brings his whole family to Egypt

Wednesday, Genesis 47:13-31 Famine in Egypt; Jacob's last days

Thursday, Genesis 48 Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh

Friday, Genesis 49:1-28 Jacob blesses each of his sons

Saturday, Genesis 49:29 – 50:26 Jacob's death and burial; Joseph forgives his brothers; Joseph's last days and death

Sermon Notes

Growing Up Jesus

A look at the lives, beliefs, and practices of Jews in Jesus' day

A new *Something Else* series that continues today

What was it like to grow up in Jesus' world? Learning to be better readers of the Bible means learning it to read in full, living color. In the case of the gospels, we need a better handle on what it was like to be a Jew in Jesus' day. In this series, we'll look at a full range of questions that swirl around the lives, beliefs, and practices of first-century Jews. You'll be surprised at how much your understanding of the gospels will be deepened. There will be plenty of surprises along the way!

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

Trip to the Biblical Lands with Scott & Patti Engle – October 2009!

In June 2007, Scott & Patti led a St. Andrew group on a life-changing tour of the biblical lands: Israel, Egypt, Ephesus, Athens, Rome and more. They are planning a similar trip in October 2009. It will be built around a 14-day Holland America cruise. In addition to the day tours, there will be a 4-week class before the trip and even lectures at sea to help you get as much out of this once-in-a-lifetime trip as possible.

For more info go to www.thebibleacademy.com

The first information meeting will be at 7pm on Tuesday evening, Aug 26, in Piro Hall.

You can also call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@thebibleacademy.com

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Genesis is filled with stories of family. Not only is it the story of God forming a people, his people -- his family, it is the sprawling story of Abraham's family, spanning generations and geography. It is a bit like one of those epic family novels that makes it to the bestseller lists from time to time. And like all families, Abraham's is beset by problems in the midst of their joys. Though Abraham has been chosen by God to receive God's covenant, he and his family are not spared jealousies, treacheries, and manipulation. When we read these stories, we quickly see that not every Bible story has a moral, that not every Bible character is a role model for us. Indeed, it can be hard to understand what God might want us to get from some of these stories. Nonetheless, these are our stories. We too are children of Abraham.

In recent weeks, we've looked at a lot of family stories. A few were heartwarming, such as Jacob's love for Rachel, but most were messy and troubling. You might begin by sharing some of your own family stories. Do you find echoes of your own family in the Genesis stories? How so? Perhaps you have stories of envy or favoritism, even backroom plotting. Where do we find God in the midst of family joys and family concerns? How often do families truly place God first -- before all, before anyone? How might we put God back at the center of our families -- not just our immediate family but our extended family also. We proclaim to the world that Jesus is Lord, but is he really the Lord of our families? How do we love and live with family members who deny Christ? It is probably helpful to recall the stories from Genesis where God blesses and protects the "outsider," as with Cain and Ishmael.